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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR H. THOMAS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [PARM](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE HEARS HOPES FOR THE FUTURE DESPITE DISCOURAGING EVENTS IN THE PRESENT

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: Deputy Secretary Armitage had four brief "pull-aside" meetings at the start of a reception held in his honor, August 22, with the Leader of the PA Opposition the Maldivian High Commissioner, Tamil National Alliance representatives, and the Leader of the Muslim Congress. D heard from three different Sri Lankan political perspectives hopes that cohabitation might still be possible and that the peace talks could bear fruit. He also heard the doubts of these groups about the sincerity and abilities of each other, the GSL, and the LTTE. In all meetings, D explained his visit was a result of President Bush's belief that, because of the GSL's bold decisions on peace and economic reform, it is time for the US to play a larger role in Sri Lanka. D questioned interlocutors on their opinions of the appropriate role for the US at this time. Most wanted the US to expand its involvement and strongly support the peace process. Bilateral issues, including security cooperation and Article 98 agreement on ICC dominated the discussions with the Maldivian HC. End summary.

Opposition Leader Mahinda Rajapakse

2. (C) People's Alliance (PA) Leader Mahinda Rajapakse began by saying that everyone, PA included, wants peace, but that most people in the South have reservations about the sincerity of LTTE leader Prabhakaran. Rajapakse noted that previous peace efforts had failed, and many believe that Prabhakaran, leader of the LTTE, is using this ceasefire interval to build up his strength, and will eventually take over the disputed areas.

3. (C) On cohabitation between the President and the prime Minister, Rajapakse said it would not work unless the two leaders cooperate. He continued that he was not sure if enough MPs would vote with the government on a Constitutional amendment to limit the President's power to dissolve Parliament, but it was possible. He referred to recent meetings with MPs and the Party Secretary on this issue and said he will meet with the President immediately upon her return from the UK, and inform her that some in the PA will vote with the PM's UNF. Responding to a comment from D on the President's possible dissolution of Parliament, Rajapakse said, "if there are elections, there will be a bloodbath" because people in the villages use the occasion to address personal and political rivalries. President Kumaratunga will have to compromise, he said.

4. (C) According to Rajapakse, areas where the US could help are addressing the problems with the JVP, which is now going into trade unions and organizing strikes; speaking out for cohabitation; and getting India more involved. India would be seen as a counterweight to what some perceive as a sympathetic bent toward the LTTE by the Norwegians.

Maldivian High Commissioner A. Azeez Yousef

5. (C) After wishing Azeez luck on his imminent return to Male' after eight years in Colombo, D said he wanted the Maldivian government to understand what US intentions were in Sri Lanka, and explained the purpose of his visit. D then requested that Azeez ask his government to consider entering into a bilateral agreement on the ICC under Article 98. The Ambassador noted previous discussions on the topic with the government in Male', and that no decision had been conveyed yet.

6. (C) Azeez said he had spoken with the President, who had asked him to express the Maldivians' gratitude for the close relations between the U.S. and Maldives, especially the bilateral cooperation on defense, saying it gave them a sense of security. He also conveyed the GORM's appreciation for US support in resisting calls within ECOSOC for its graduation from LDC status. Finally, he noted the efforts for a Fulbright program in the Maldives and asked for more support to send students abroad for high school and higher education.

Tamil National Alliance (TNA)  
(comprised of smaller Tamil parties)

17. (C) R. Sampathan, Secretary General of the Tamil United Liberation Front, started by saying that although the ceasefire agreement was basically implemented, the TNA's major concern remained that people could not yet return to their homes. He said when the military moves out of a school or temple, as outlined in the MOU, they frequently just go to the adjoining property. In his opinion, that does not constitute removal of forces.

18. (C) Talking about the substance of a future agreement, Sampathan said the TNA was against dividing the country, but was compelled to call for separatism in the past because the government was not ready to restructure itself to include all citizens. If the country is not to be divided, the center should hold only enough power -- in defense, foreign affairs and currency -- to keep it from dividing. In his opinion, the government was not yet thinking about this. He said that the Tamils have no problem with the peace process since the LTTE is on board, but that many Sinhalese are against it. He said if the country is to stay whole, the GSL must recognize the Tamils as a distinct people with a distinct heritage, and give them a devolved ability to govern themselves and enough control to rehabilitate their areas.

19. (C) N. Raviraj, a TULF member from Jaffna described problems in his district that started with the ceasefire. He stated that the army's new high security zones incorporate people's property. Most houses are destroyed in these areas, he said, and the army occupies the ones that aren't. People in Jaffna are worried, he continued, because they don't think the army will ever leave. K. Ponnambalam of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress followed up by saying some families are moved out of their house so the army can move in, and they only receive meager rations to survive. The TNA tries to show support for the government, especially on the peace process, but it is difficult, he said, and the alliance endures much political pressure to withdraw that support. T. Thangavadivel, from Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization noted that many steps have been taken, but the Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and some in the PA are trying to spoil the peace process.

10. (C) Sampathan said that in the TNA's meetings with the LTTE, democracy and respect for minorities are discussed, as is the belief that, "we don't want to treat others the way the Sinhalese have treated us". The responsibility now is on the Sinhalese side, said Sampathan. When D countered that the TNA has responsibilities too, including to the Muslims, Sampathan said they would ensure their safety, rights, security and even power sharing. On a role for the US, Sampathan said the US should be seen as evenhanded. D explained that the US would continue to condemn human rights abuses, and will attempt to use economic programs to raise the level of all in Sri Lanka.

Ports Minister and  
Leader of the Muslim Congress Rauf Hakeem

11. (C) After giving D a brief historical view of Muslim relations in Sri Lanka, Hakeem described his meeting with Prabhakaran on April 13, saying he thought they came to an agreement that the LTTE would not try to impose its will on the Muslim communities. Although Muslims realize peace will not be easy to attain, they had some hope after this meeting. Their experience since the ceasefire, however, has not been good. The violent incidents that occurred against Muslims caused them to lose confidence in Prabhakaran's control of his cadres. The basic problem, in Hakeem's view, has been the Muslims' refusal to be assimilated by the Tamils, and both groups' desire to assert themselves politically. Problems are also economic - fighting for scarce resources, he said.

12. (C) The Muslims don't want to open another front in the East, he said, but the LTTE wants to unite the north and east to concentrate their power. People are fearful of the future, he continued, but the US public statements to date have helped. He said, "we depend on the US to see that we get a fair deal. We know you will stand for what is right."

WILLS